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AUTHOR Weisberg, Phyllis G.
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ABSTRACT

A number of major social and demographic trends are having a profound effect on American families with young children. Among these are changes in the characteristics of poverty in families with preschool-age children, curtailment of formerly available financial support or changes in the means of obtaining such support, and the increasing cost of raising children. The "new face of poverty" is associated with out-of-wedlock birth, and with divorce and desertion. The result is that young children increasingly live under conditions that threaten their growth and development. The composition of American society has changed due to nearly 2 decades of low birth rates; increased longevity; medical advances and care; and several social trends, including later marriage, later child bearing, and the preference for smaller families. Increasing costs of raising children, and pessimism about the future of the economy, may also have caused changes. Children experience additional stress due to divorce, and to membership in step- and single-parent families. Family support programs developed to help children and their families face developmental threat and emotional stress range from information and referral services to day care and parent education programs. Most of these programs are initiated and supported by the families they serve, but government, business, industry, and advocates have important roles to play in this area. (RH)

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SYMPOSIUM: SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN THE NEXT DECADE

PAPER PRESENTED
AT
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SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

PRESENTED BY
PHYLLIS G. WEISBERG, Ph.D.
PROFESSOR
DEPARTMENT OF SPECIAL EDUCATION
TRENTON STATE COLLEGE
TRENTON, NEW JERSEY

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TITLE: Symposium: Social Implications and Alternatives for Families and Children in the Next Decade

SECTION: Child and Family Relations

AUDIENCE: Teachers, Parents, Support Professions

CATEGORY: Public Policy, Leadership

DESCRIPTION:

Study of research literature on the effects of social changes upon families and their children's development leads to concern about how to enhance the lives of these children and their families. Since the 1970's the accumulating evidence indicates that children are no longer well cared for and childrearing has become devaluated. Children are living under conditions that are a threat to their well-being and to their future as adults. Demographic changes show that the make-up and balance of the population is shifting: an aging population with few children and many young adults. Many factors account for the decrease in the numbers of children. The consequences of this decrease to society are many. Changes in family life and styles influence child development. Divorce, single parent families, step families, working mothers, working parents impact in a variety of ways upon developing children. The influence of television viewing upon the growing child is of serious concern. TV violence and commercials alter children's perceptions of reality. TV viewing reduces parental nurturing and family interaction.

Comparison of studies on children's lives in the 1950's and the 1980's reveals many interesting changes. Today children spend less time each day with adults, watch television a good deal, depend more upon their peers, grow up lonely and with more stress.

SYMPOSIUM: SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS AND ALTERNATIVES
FOR FAMILIES AND CHILDREN IN THE NEXT DECADE

In 1971 President Nixon vetoed a bill by Senator Walter Mondale that was designed to establish a comprehensive national system of day care. President Nixon projected a fear held by millions in this country. He noted that if the Federal Government assumed financial responsibility for supporting child development, it would be committing the government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing and that would be against a family centered approach. He implied that publicly funded day care was un-American and anti-family. But a mere 17 years later over 50 day care bills have been introduced in Congress. Apparently day care is now an item that is worth supporting. Both sides of the political spectrum, men such as Democrats Christopher Dodd and Edward Kennedy and Republican Orrin Hatch support such bills. What precipitated this change?

The change resulted from the fact that working mothers with young children are now commonplace, not exceptions in our society. Nearly 60% of women with children ages 3-5 work outside their homes. Nearly 50% of mothers with children under age 6 work outside their homes. It is projected that by 1995 the percentage of working mothers with children under age of 6 will increase to more than 66%.

In what facilities are these children? Who is caring for them? They are cared for in day care centers, by relatives, by housekeepers, by the next door neighbor, and, often, by no one. Today in the United States childcare is a patchwork of services, compromises and individual adjustments and compromises. It is known that among low-income mothers, especially, nearly 50% had never worked and the other 50% were unemployed because of their inability to either find or afford appropriate day care.

In this country there are a number of major social and demographic trends which are having a profound effect upon families with young children. Among these are changes in the characteristics of poverty in families with pre-school aged children, alterations in obtaining or curtailment of amounts of financial allocations formerly available to such families and the increasing costs of raising children.

Harrington (1984) states that the new "face of poverty" is the result of social trends which are changing the entire population in the United States. Poverty among families with children younger than age six has leveled off at about 22% (Lehman, 1986). In the 1980's (Newberger, Melnicoe and Newberger, 1986) 47% of Black children, 40% of Hispanic children and 10% of White children were born into and spend their early years in poverty stricken homes.

This poverty is associated often with out-of-wedlock birth, divorce or desertion. This means that young children are increasingly living under conditions that threaten their growth and development, physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially. Packard's book (1983) Our Endangered Children: Growing Up in a Changing World examines the impact on children of (1) wondering if parents are going to split up, (2) living in a single-parent family, (3) having to adjust to newcomers if parents remarry, (4) being taken care of by a caretaker outside of their home, (5) being left

alone in an empty house, (6) having little contact with adults, (7) sitting for hours in front of the TV when not in school, (8) being lonely much of the time, (9) having parents who are self-absorbed or under great stress. These conditions, Packard notes, present different types of problems for today's children and not only "promote a sense of insecurity" but also lay "a poor foundation for adult life."

DEMOGRAPHY

Another reason for the changes in our society is the make-up and balance (or demography) of American society. America experienced high birth rates for two decades after World War II, followed by nearly two decades of low birth rates. These factors plus increased longevity have changed the composition of American society. Our society is aging, has fewer children and many young maturing adults. The U.S. Bureau of Census (1981) report reveals that between 1970 and 1980 the number of people between the ages of 25 and 34 increased by 32%; those over 65 increased by 17%; and, the number of children decreased by 5%. The increase in young adults represents the postwar baby boom children who have "grown-up." Medical advances and care have contributed to the increase in the numbers of older longer-living adults. And the decrease in the numbers of children may be explained by several trends, such as later marriage, later childbearing and the choice made by many couples to have few or no children. These trends have been influenced by the women's movement of the 1960's which led women to choose a career first, marriage and motherhood later (Dawd, 1983). Also, the increasing cost of raising a child (Hoffman, 1975), as well as pessimism about the future of the economy have limited the numbers of children couples decide to have.

The consequences of having fewer children in a society are many; some favorable and some negative. Younger workers entering the job market will face frustration. There will be fewer opportunities for promotion since higher level jobs will be filled by the baby boomers who will not be at their retirement age until the first decade of the new century. Thus, the children growing up today will be rivals of these older workers. These young people will need to produce the nation's workers, to ensure the well-being of their own children and to provide for the needs of the aging individuals in their society (Bane, 1976).

FAMILY LIFE

Traditional families, i.e. the two parent family with mother at home to care for the children and father as the primary breadwinner are less characteristic of the home environment of today's children. There are many different types of families: (1) both parents employed, (2) father's sharing childrearing responsibilities; (3) step families including children from earlier marriages, (4) increasing numbers of single parent families. Researchers note that the traditional family is of recent origin (Lamb, 1982) and that no family form is the best. Different cultural groups have different standards about what family structure is proper and best.

DIVORCE

Divorce is another major change that affects families and their children. In over 60% of divorces the children are under the age of eighteen (Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families, 1983). The research notes that the first year after a divorce is a critical period for the entire family, especially the children. Coping with the stress is related to the child's age, to sex and birth order, to the presence or absence of siblings, to the psychological status of the custodial parent and to the availability/ involvement of the non-custodial parent (Hetherington, Cox and Cox, 1982). Preschool children are more vulnerable. Boys suffer more than girls and often begin to exhibit behavioral problems. Only children suffer more distress. Parental distress may result in neglect of and lack of recognition of and attention to the children and their needs.

STEPFAMILIES

The remarriage of one or both parents is an additional source of problems and anxiety for children. Cherlin (1981) notes that 10% of American children under the age of 18 live in "blended," "reconstituted families" or "new extended families."

Living with a step parent, step siblings and other "step" relatives creates acute stress for children (Fishman and Hamel, 1981). Tension, adjustment, resentment, conflict over loyalties emerge. These children become confused about values and discipline.

SINGLE PARENT FAMILIES

The report of the Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families (1983) states that 1 in every 5 children and 1 in every 2 black children lives in a single parent home. The majority of these one parent homes are headed by women with low incomes. Divorce and out-of-wedlock births account for the largest number of single parent families. The problems come from the difficulties that emerge from the divorce, and a possible remarry and the limits on available funds. Other difficulties that affect the children of single parent homes are due to parent task overload, or stress, inconsistent or no discipline, too much responsibility given too soon and lack of parental nurturance and guidance.

WORKING MOTHERS

There is no research evidence to indicate that mothers' working outside the home cause harm to their children (Scarr, 1984). There are positive aspects to consider. When mothers work the family may avoid problems of inflation or poverty. The mothers' sense of efficacy, feelings of self confidence and accomplishment may enhance family life too.

Yet problems exist. Many families live far from relatives and do not have the support of counsel and childcare. In many European countries the government plays an important role in facilitating family life in providing maternity and paternity leaves and in subsidizing child care (Kahn, 1986). In the United States there are no such policies, facilities or financial arrangements (Zigler and Muenchaw, 1983). As noted above, many children are either left alone or may sit for hours in front of the television. Reports note that 2-7 million children, ages 7-12 years come home to an empty house daily (Families and Child Care: Improving the Options, 1984). These latchkey children are involved in confronting burglars, starting fires and experiencing feelings of fear which carry throughout their lives. A major activity of these "latchkey" children is watching television. Studies point to evidence that such prolonged viewing is associated with aggressive behavior found so often in the content of TV programs (Pearl, et al, 1982). Not only program content influences children's attitudes, but TV commercials also exhert influence, much of it negative and unrealistic (Baecher, 1983). Relying on TV as a family babysitter reduces family interactions and impacts negatively upon children's social and emotional development.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS

In view of the problems facing children and their families today many programs have been and are being developed. These are family support programs. These range from providing information and referral services to setting up day care and parent education programs (Weiss, 1983). Most of these programs are initiated and supported by the families they service. And, as such, some researchers state that these programs will have a major impact on families in the future (Zigler and Weiss, 1985).

Other agencies and groups need to take an active role. Government, business and industry and advocates are sorely needed. Where and how is the question.

That government has an important role is well documented (Harvey, 1983). When in 1981 the congress drastically reduced Federal spending for social services requests for emergency shelter for families with children tripled; homelessness and hunger increased. Therefore, government policies should be developed and implemented to facilitate family life and the well-being of children. These policies should be based on social indicators and sound principles of child development. This means that legislators need to be educated about psychological processes, child development, and the social needs of families and society. Yet, the government is limited by how much money is available for distribution. This means that business and industry should become involved and help to institute those changes that would impact positively on families and children. Business and industry can exert influence in the area of work as it relates to family life. Work and family life today are overlapping interdependent worlds in our society where working mothers are now the norm, not the exception (Brim and Abels, 1975). The role of business and industry in accommodating working families is evolving, but slowly. Some changes that have occurred are flexible work schedules,

part-time jobs, job sharing and maternity and paternity leaves (Bureau of Business Practice, 1979). Still the United States lags far behind European countries that have policies which encourage nurturing of children, having children and caring for children.

Business and industry can help to facilitate family life (Economic Policy Council, 1986). But they need the help of sociologists, child development psychologists, researchers and others who understand and work with families. Also, as Blom notes (1984) advocacy is needed to help to plan for and implement needed changes. Advocacy is defined as acting in behalf of one's own interests, pleading the cause of others or defending/maintaining a needed cause. Children are obviously unable to act in their own behalf. Therefore, professionals in the disciplines that work with families and children should assume that role. Individuals may advocate for children, but if many unite and work together they will achieve the needed goals more quickly and better. Parents should be involved as advocates too.

What may advocates do? Advocates monitor conditions in the lives of children and try to effect changes needed to improve conditions. Advocates educate policy makers and the public about the needs of children. In this latter role advocates may disseminate information, provide expert testimony, keep the problem "alive" and follow problems through to solution. So, let's begin - now! We need a public policy. We need leadership to help the families and the children of the next decades.

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